

E 533
.B46
Copy 1



E

533

B-16

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.

Chap. E 53

Shelf B 46

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.



The Service of the Vermont Troops.

AN ORATION

BEFORE THE

RE-UNION SOCIETY

OF

VERMONT OFFICERS,

IN THE

REPRESENTATIVES' HALL, MONTPELIER, VT.,

NOVEMBER 2, 1882,

BY LIEUT. GEO. GRENVILLE BENEDICT.

MONTPELIER:

WATCHMAN AND JOURNAL PRESS.

1882.



ORATION.

MR. PRESIDENT AND BROTHERS OF THE RE-UNION SOCIETY :

The story of the great civil war in which our society had its origin will in time be told, and that more fully than the story of any great war in human history. But it will not soon be fully told. Covering more land and water than any other modern war; enlisting the services of over three millions of soldiers, who faced each other in nearly a hundred important battles and in lesser engagements without count; seen by more eye-witnesses capable of describing its events than any other war since the world was made; a war about which more was written and printed in the time of it than any other war,—the very abundance of materials for the historian adds immensely to the labor and duration of his task. The four thousand solid pages thus far issued of the Official Records of the War, comprising simply the orders and official reports of military operations in the field, which the government is slowly printing, barely covers the first nine months of the war and but one important battle. Histories of campaigns and passages of the war are appearing year by year, more numerous, more careful and more valuable than in the preceding years. To sift fact from fancy, in all this mass of statement; to clear away the rubbish and let the solid truth appear: to decide the disputed claims, so inevitable and so

multitudinous in military matters; to determine the events of absolute importance, amid the world of achievements of lesser and only comparative magnitude—is a work of time, and of not a little time. The latest contribution to the history of the war of 1812 has appeared within the past year, nearly seventy years after its close. It may be as many before the history of the war for the Union is fully written.

The fermentation of the seventeen years since the close of the war has been in part a process of unsettling. Time has seriously lessened some military reputations. The possession of the Confederate archives and reports, and the labors of southern historians, enable us to see many events from two sides which before were only visible from one; and as the years go on and facts develop and theories disappear many things take on a different aspect. Yet many things, of course, have been settled—and are now as plain as they ever will be. In the hour which on short notice and with too scanty preparation I have undertaken to fill, I propose to mention some of the points in the war record of Vermont which have passed beyond serious dispute.

First, then, it will never be denied that the response of our Green Mountain State to the call of the imperilled Union was a worthy one.

Vermont was pledged to a prompt and patriotic response by her ancestral fame. It was not a low example of patriotism and self-sacrifice that was set to their descendants by the founders of our State. As you remember, the first announcement of the organization of the independent State of Vermont to the Continental Congress, was accompanied by the offer to Congress of “the services of more than five thousand hardy soldiers, capable of bearing arms in defence of American liberty.” That was the offer of a man from every family, in a

new community where the strong arms that had but begun to subdue the forest, could not be spared without sore privation in the rustic homes and households. In her next communication to Congress, Vermont, though not yet admitted to the Union, offered to furnish "from year to year, an equal number of troops in the field, in proportion to their number, as Congress shall estimate the quotas of the several States in proportion to their numbers—which troops shall be clothed, quartered and paid by the State of Vermont." You know how the infant State fulfilled these pledges. Her first regiment (Col. Seth Warner's), like the First Vermont Volunteers in the late war, was organized for temporary service. Her next was a full continental regiment which served throughout the war for independence. The entire militia of Vermont turned out to Bennington in 1777, though only a part could reach the ground in time to take part in the battle. At a later date we find the State in her penury laying a tax for the support of 1,500 men in the army. Vermonters took the first forts captured from the British; planned and furnished troops for the first invasion of Canada; formed a third of Stark's force at Bennington; defended their own territory and part of New York, without help from the rest of the continental army; fought side by side with their brothers throughout the Revolutionary war, and made the title of Green Mountain Boy a synonym for courage, hardihood, effective fighting and unselfish patriotism. In proportion to means and numbers no State of the old Thirteen gave more or suffered more or accomplished more for American liberty.

In many respects, however, our State was far less ready to answer a call to arms in 1861 than it was in 1775. The eighty years between the Revolution and the Rebellion had made many States populous and wealthy, but had made Vermont

neither. For nearly a quarter of a century the State had been stationary in population and nearly so in property. The times when every Vermonter was as handy with the rifle as with the axe, had passed away. The military spirit had become dormant and apparently extinct. The State finally ceased to make appropriations for the militia or to require any military duty of the citizens. The June trainings became a farce and then but the memory of a farce. For ten years previous to 1854 there was not the semblance of any military organization in the State. The few independent military companies organized in the six years following were maintained more for amusement than with any anticipation of actual service. The mutterings of the coming storm were indeed unmistakable, but they seemed to fall on deaf ears. To one who looks back on that time in the light of subsequent events, the unwillingness of our people to believe in the possibility of civil war, even while the southern States were arming and seizing United States forts and arsenals and moving rapidly on in the formation of a separate government, is the strangest feature of the situation. The messenger who came to Governor Fairbanks in the first week in January, 1861, from the one man in New England who was fully alive to the imminence of the war, to say that he was buying overcoats and ball cartridges for the Massachusetts militia, and that he hoped the governor of Vermont would at once commence similar preparations for the defense of the National Capital, took back to Governor Andrew no very encouraging response. When, three weeks later, the first indication that our State authorities had reached the point of action came, in an order to the captains of the companies of uniformed militia, directing them to ascertain how many men in their companies would respond to a call for troops to main-

tain the Constitution and the law, but ten captains responded in writing. They reported an aggregate of 376 men armed, after a fashion, partially equipped, and willing to march, if ordered, to the defense of Washington. The captains of three or four more companies probably responded verbally. But at most the State had of citizen soldiers less than enough to form a single regiment, while to arm a levy it had, all told, 957 muskets, most of them smooth-bores and some of them ancient flint-locks, and 503 Colt's pistols, described in the report of Quartermaster-General Davis, as "of no practical use whatever!" If it be true, as Gen. W. T. Sherman has said, that "when the war came no people on earth were less prepared for it than those of the United States," it is also true that the people of no State were less prepared for it than those of Vermont. Yet the unreadiness of our people was not owing to the apathy of stupidity or fear; it was rather the result of a devotion to the Union so absolute that its possessors could not find it in their hearts to believe that it was not shared by any considerable portion of their countrymen, and of a confident trust that the better impulses of the southern masses would yet counteract the traitorous schemes of their leaders.

Unwilling as they were to believe in the possibility of the dreadful alternative of civil war, the attitude of the Vermonters towards treason and rebellion was at no time doubtful. It was a Vermont judge, sitting in the United States Circuit Court in New York City, who more than three months before Sumter was fired on, electrified the country by a memorable charge to the grand jury, in which he defined the seizure of Federal property by the southern militia as acts of treason, and charged that "any individual owing allegiance to the United States who shall furnish these southern traitors with arms or munitions of

war, vessels or means of transportation, or materials which will aid the traitors in carrying out their traitorous purposes, is clearly liable to be indicted, tried, convicted and executed as a traitor—for death is the penalty of treason.” This was a bold utterance to be made in a city filled with southerners and southern sympathizers, many of them engaged in supplying ships and arms and ammunition to the traitors—a city whose mayor had apologized to Senator Toombs of Georgia for the stoppage, by the New York police, of a shipment of arms to arm the militia of that State; and who had hinted a threat that in case of war New York would set herself up as a free city, aloof from allegiance to either government. It was a Vermont Senator, who in January, 1861, introduced the first and I believe the only practical measure of resistance to the rebellion that was proposed in that Congress, in his bill authorizing the President to close the ports of the seceded States, and suspending the United States mail service in those States. And in these expressions Judge Smalley and Senator Collamer but spoke the loyalty and purpose of the Vermonters of both political parties.

When the actual call to arms came, you remember how Vermont rose with the great uprising of the North. We could not, indeed, reply to Sumter, as our forefathers replied to Lexington, with the capture of a walled fortress. We could not send a regiment to march with the Massachusetts Sixth through rebellious Baltimore. But the proclamation of our governor, convening the Legislature to provide men and arms, bore even date with Mr. Lincoln’s proclamation, and antedated by at least a day all similar proclamations of other governors; and our first regiment was ready in time to make the first permanent occupation of the soil of Virginia made by the troops of the Union, and to take a hand in the first battle.

As to numbers furnished for the war, it is, I think, not putting it too strong to say that Vermont sent a greater proportion of her able-bodied men into the service than any other State. Governor Curtin of Pennsylvania, at the meeting of the Society of the Army of the Potomac, in 1876, said proudly of his State : “ She furnished [to the war] one in seventeen of her population—a ratio larger than that of the conscription of 1814, in France.” Pennsylvania was a great, wealthy and populous State, full of able-bodied workmen, and having an immense pecuniary stake in the preservation of the Union. If our little community, far from the theatre of war and from danger of invasion, did as well as the Keystone State of the Republic, she did well. But, computed on the general basis of all such comparisons, the credits on the books of the Provost Marshal General of the United States, Vermont furnished for the war not one in seventeen, but one in *ten* of her population. One or two other States, perhaps, furnished as large a proportion ; but no other had so small a proportion of its citizens liable to and fit for military duty—with the possible exception of Massachusetts, whose large excess of female population must of course be taken into the account. No other State, however—not Massachusetts or Maine or New Hampshire,—had been so depleted of young, able and enterprising men, the very class which supplied the Volunteers, as was Vermont. The census of 1880 shows that there are more native Vermonters domiciled in other States than are now residing within our borders ;—and if that was not the case in 1860, the fact could not have come much short of it. Of course every State had many sons who fought in the ranks of the regiments of other States ; but not one, I venture to say, had so many as Vermont. A count of the native Vermonters in the Second Minnesota regiment, made on Capitol Hill, Wash-

ington, in July, 1861, showed that 170, or one-fifth of the aggregate of the regiment, were born in Vermont; yet there were several Western States in which native Vermonters were more plenty than in Minnesota. If the full statistics could be obtained they would probably show that as many men born in Vermont were included in the rolls of other States, as in our own; while the muster rolls of our Vermont regiments show a very small sprinkling of men of other nativities. The bone and sinew, life, energy, intelligence, of our commonwealth, was under arms or engaged in the support of the troops in the field. No other community, it is safe to say, so nearly approached unanimity in loyal sentiment. No man occupying any official or representative position in our State gave any aid or sympathy to the rebellion. The list of northern traitors consigned to Forts Warren and La Fayette contains the name of no Vermonter. The number of our citizens who by word or thought opposed the war, was the merest fraction.

Our people gave of their means as freely as of their men. A frugal folk, unused to large expenditures for anything, Vermont's first appropriation for war purposes was *a million dollars*. And the New York *World* said of it, without contradiction from any quarter, "Many have done nobly, but none, resources considered, have equalled this." Our outlay of money for the recruiting, equipment and pay of troops was *nine millions*. This on a grand list of \$970,690 (in 1861), representing a total valuation of a little over eighty five millions of property and money, for taxation. The towns of Vermont, in their municipal capacity, expended for war purposes over five millions. That sum is the portion of our war expenses that was paid without thought or hope of repayment. I have not the means of comparison of this outlay with that of many

other States, but if Vermont paid as freely as the noble Old Bay State it will be admitted that she did well. The cities and towns of Massachusetts paid for war expenses \$13,010,867, being \$10.74 for each inhabitant. The towns of Vermont expended \$5,215,787, being \$16.55 for each inhabitant. The property of Vermont, as valued for taxation, was, in 1861, \$85,834,209. The taxable valuation of Massachusetts for the same year was \$876,602,264. After all allowances are made for differences in valuations, Massachusetts had at least eight times as much taxable property as Vermont. The war outlay of the State and towns of Massachusetts aggregated forty-two millions. The corresponding outlay of the State and towns of Vermont aggregated nine millions. Massachusetts paid in round numbers five dollars on every hundred of her property, real and personal. Vermont paid ten dollars and a half on every hundred.

The Vermont troops cost the government less than the average of the army and probably less than those of any other State. This was because Vermont early adopted the method of strengthening her regiments in the field by additions of fresh recruits, instead of organizing additional regiments, and kept it up more largely, I think, than any other State. The average final aggregate of the Vermont regiments was upwards of 1800. The similar aggregate of the Massachusetts and New Jersey regiments was about 1500 ; of the Iowa regiments 1400 ; of the Ohio regiments 1300. The proportion of commissioned officers to the rank and file in the Vermont regiments was thus less than the average ; and as the pay of the lowest commissioned officer was equal to the pay of eight privates, the average cost of our regiments to the government was proportionately reduced.

But if the troops of Vermont were cheaper to the Government than the average, was the service they rendered less valuable than the average — less effective, less costly of life and limb? Let us look at this. The limits of this occasion will not permit anything like a full review of the services rendered by the Vermont troops. Suppose we select the twelve most prominent campaigns and battles of the war—and see what the Vermonters had to do in them. We may take the first battle because it was the first; Bull Run, because, as Mr. William Swinton says, it showed that the war was to be a war and not a sixty days' riot; Shiloh as the defeat of the first formidable aggressive campaign of the Confederate Armies in the West; the Peninsular Campaign of 1862, memorable for rebel successes; Gettysburg, as the defeat of the greatest rebel invasion of the East; Vicksburg, because it opened Mississippi to the Union; the Wilderness, which inaugurated the “hammering out” of the Confederacy; Cedar Creek, as the most romantic battle of the war; Atlanta and the march to the sea, which showed that the Confederacy was only a shell; Nashville, which annihilated the rebellion at the West; and the capture of Petersburg, which was the capture of Richmond and the collapse of the Confederacy. In three of these great critical campaigns the Vermont troops had no share. We had no regiment at Shiloh or in the Army of the Cumberland or under Sherman. But it is certainly noticeable that in three-fourths of them, the troops of a little State whose quota formed but an eightieth part of the grand Union aggregate, should have been engaged and should have rendered important service.

Let us consider this somewhat in detail. The first actual collision of the war,—for Sumter was the bloodless battering down of an almost silent fortress, and the affair at Philippi,

West Virginia, was an unresisted rout of a rebel battalion—was at Big Bethel. It is known as the first “battle” of the war, and in its consequences, of encouragement of the South, was really an important battle. Planned in ignorance and folly, intended to be the surprise of an outpost where there was no outpost, and the capture of formidable works, which Gen. Butler and Major Winthrop, the authors of the plan, supposed to be on the South instead of the North side of Back River, it is a comfort to remember that no Vermonter was in any way responsible for the scheme. Gen. Phelps disapproved of the expedition as planned, and Col. Washburn counselled a return after the night collision of Union regiments. When the enclosed earth-work and rifle pits of Big Bethel—manned by 1,500 men and seven pieces of artillery—were reached, it was of course found that Colonels Magruder and Hill of the Confederate army had not been trained at West Point to put their main works before instead of behind the natural defences. The attack on them as conducted by Gen. Pierce, consisted chiefly in marching regiments to and fro on his side of the creek and under cover of the woods. The only actual assault by the Union infantry was made by a battalion of Vermont and Massachusetts troops, commanded by a Vermonter. Col. Washburn’s was the only command that crossed the creek or inflicted any damage on the enemy. It was an inglorious affair, but noteworthy because it exhibited at the outset the mettle of our Vermont soldiers; and the declaration of an eye-witness from another State will not be gainsaid: that “if the other troops had done their duty as well and gone as far as those of Massachusetts and Vermont, Big Bethel would not have headed a long list of Federal reverses.”

At Bull Run the Second Vermont regiment was not put in till the day was already lost. Its officers found no organized

body of Union troops in sight, outside of their own brigade, when they went into action. The regiment rendered very important service in checking pursuit, while our army was withdrawn across Bull Run. The Richmond papers particularized the Vermont regiment as one whose fire inflicted heavy loss on their side; and the remark of Col. O. O. Howard, their brigade commander, in a subsequent address to the regiment, was a fair epitome of their conduct: "Cool and steady as regular troops," said he, "you stood on the brow of that hill and fired your thirty-six rounds, and retired only at the command of your Colonel." Our Vermont Second appeared to no disadvantage as compared with any regiment that crossed Bull Run on that disastrous day; and it is worth remembering that the brigade of McDowell's army, which, taking coolness and stern determination from their commander, moved last along the Centreville ridge and covered the retreat of our army, was commanded by a gallant son of Vermont, Col. Israel B. Richardson.

The universal mortification at the want of results from Gen. McClellan's splendid preparations in the Peninsular campaign of 1862, is somewhat alleviated for Vermonters, by the fact that the only movement below Yorktown that could be called "rapid and vigorous,"—which are the adjectives applied to it by Gen. Magruder, of the Confederate army—was the assault on the enemy's works at Lee's Mills by a battalion of Vermont troops. Had they been supported by Gen. McClellan, instead of withdrawn, the thin line along which a few thousand Confederates so long held back three times their number would have been pierced, and the whole history of the campaign probably changed. "Regret that the movement was not pushed," says Gen. Webb, the latest historian of the Peninsular campaign,

“is enhanced by Gen. Smith’s reflection, that among the four companies of the third Vermont, who first crossed Warwick Creek, there were more individual acts of heroism performed, than he ever before read of, in a great battle.” If more complimentary mention is made of any regiment in that campaign, I have failed to find it. So at Williamsburgh and in the battles of the Seven Days’ Retreat, the regiments of the old Vermont brigade showed themselves eager in advance, and orderly, though sullen and quick to turn, in retreat.

In the first expedition against Vicksburg, our Seventh regiment, though not engaged in any pitched battle, for in fact there was none, sustained an amount of suffering and loss from hardship and exposure in the swamps and in the digging of Gen. Butler’s cut-off canal, such as no regiment endured in battle. The well were not enough to care for the sick and bury the dead, and a regiment over eight hundred strong was reduced to one hundred effective men.

No detailed history of the second Vicksburg campaign can omit the siege of Port Hudson, which was in effect an outpost of Vicksburg, or ought to omit mention of the brilliant service of the Eighth Vermont. It requires a stern and genuine quality of courage to advance where brave men have fallen back, and to restore a failing and desperate assault. This was twice the duty of our Eighth regiment at Port Hudson. In Gen. Banks’ first attempt to carry the enemy’s works the brigade of Col. Stephen Thomas formed the third line of the assaulting force, and the Eighth Vermont had the right, and led the advance of that brigade. The sturdy resistance met by the first two lines in front of the outer defences of Port Hudson, had brought them to a stand, when Thomas’s brigade was ordered forward. Passing through the broken lines of battle

before them, the Eighth and the other regiments of the brigade moved steadily upon the Confederate outworks, drove the enemy from them, pursued them through ravines and fallen timber, killing many and capturing more, and did not stop till they had driven the remainder into their main fortifications. At the second assault, two weeks later, the Eighth led the storming column, which was preceded by a line of skirmishers, a regiment with hand grenades, and a regiment carrying cotton bags to fill the hostile trenches. The grenadiers and cotton-baggers found the fire too hot for them to face. Stepping through their broken files and over the bodies of those who were hugging the ground for shelter, the Eighth made a gallant, though hopeless, dash at the Confederate parapets. Eighty men, among them Adjutant Spaulding, fell in five minutes, but followed by the brave troops of the brigade, the regiment pressed straight on till a few men touched the opposing breastworks, still crowned by a line of fire. To do more was a simple impossibility; but the Eighth held a position close to the Confederate works all that day. The brigade commander, Col. Smith of the 114th New York, fell mortally wounded while rallying his command, with the assistance of Major Barstow of the Eighth Vermont, who was acting as his Assistant Adjutant General. The Eighth lost one hundred and forty men in killed and wounded, or nearly a third of its number, in those charges, but gained a reputation for bravery which it never lost.

The battle-maps of Gettysburg, prepared by the War Department—the most careful and elaborate maps ever made of any great battle—have ended disputes as to the more important movements and locations of that battle. These show, upon the flank of Picket's column, and farther to the front than any

other Union force, a Vermont brigade. Southern and Northern historians alike have made it plain that if any one movement on the Union side can be called the decisive movement of the decisive day, and so the turning point of the battle and so of the war, it was the charge of Stannard's brigade. For the honor of originating a movement so brilliant and so famous, it is surprising that there have not been more claimants. But the credit of the order will forever remain due to the brain, nerve and intuition of a Vermont brigadier. That it was executed under heavy fire, with the promptness and precision of battalion drill, was the declaration of Stannard's report;—and that, too, stands undisputed.

I pass on to The Wilderness—perhaps the least understood and most insufficiently described of the battles of the army of the Potomac. The curtain of tangled forest which protected the right of Gen. Lee's army south of the Rapidan, and which still shrouds the slopes and ravines of that bloody field, has seemed to envelope the battle in mystery, and description of many of its details has been and will always be impossible. The title of this battle to prominence, however, is sufficiently clear. It was the first battle fought by Gen. Grant after he took the chief command of the Union armies and the first in which he had to meet the ablest general of the Confederacy. On it rested the hope of the Summer campaign, and largely Grant's reputation as a general. His problem was to take through a wilderness covered with dwarf evergreens and scrub oak and an undergrowth of bristling shrubs, threaded by narrow roads with which his antagonist was far more familiar than himself, an army, covering nearly a hundred miles of highway with its 110,000 men and 4000 army wagons. Grant knew that one day was his, while as yet his movement was unfolding

to his opponent. The next day he must expect to fight, for he had an antagonist on whose want of insight or of promptness in action it would not do to count. Gen. Lee's plan was a simple one, and had probably been long formed in view of the contingency. It was to strike our army on the flank, cut it in two, roll up its halves, divided and unable to support each other, and to drive what he did not destroy back across the Rapidan, as he had driven Hooker a year before. The roads in such a region more than ever determined all military movements. In general terms Grant must move by the roads running from North to South, and Lee must strike him by the cross roads running from West to East. On the 4th of May, 1864, Grant plunged into the Wilderness. His army marched unmolested for one day. On the second day of its march, the "Brock Road," so called, in the centre of the Wilderness, a North and South road, was the key of the region. It is so called by Gen. Badeau—who was on Grant's staff, and high in his confidence, and who wrote with the reports and plans and suggestions of Grant before him, so that his account of this campaign may be almost considered Gen. Grant's account of it,—by Swinton, and by other critical historians of the war.

The key point of the Brock Road was the point of intersection of the Orange Plank Road, over which Lee sent the corps which was to strike the outstretched column of his enemy. To this point early on the morning of the 5th, Gen. Meade, (through whom all of Grant's orders were issued), sent a division, with orders to secure that point and hold it at all hazards. The force thus sent, we may be sure was selected with care. It was not a division of the Second Corps, which corps was to occupy the Brock Road, but a part of another corps. It was the division of the army, which in the opinion of its commanders, would

be surest to reach the key-point in time, and to hold it against all comers. It was the Second Division of the Sixth Corps, commanded by Gen. G. W. Getty, one of the bravest, ablest and most modest of the general officers of the army,—or rather it was three brigades of Getty's Division. One of these was the old Vermont brigade. It was the largest of the three, outnumbering each of the others by about 800 men, and was assuredly not second to either or to any brigade of that splendid fighting division, in marching, fighting or staying qualities. The brigade commander was Gen. Lewis A. Grant, and the regimental commanders were Colonel Newton Stone of the 2d; Colonel T. O. Seaver of the 3d; Colonel Geo. P. Foster of the 4th; Lieut. Colonel J. R. Lewis of the 5th, and Colonel E. L. Barney of the 6th.

Gen. Badeau tells us how the trust imposed in Getty and his division was repaid. "Getty," he says, "with a single division first [that is before the corps which Lee had sent to seize the point] reached the critical point and held it afterwards for hours in the presence of double his own force, although Lee in person commanded in front. And when Hancock with the Second corps arrived, it was the National troops and not the rebels who made the first assault." "Held" here means held by the most stubborn and bloody fighting. The troops in turn attacked and repulsed by Getty's division were two divisions of Hill's corps, viz.: Heth's division numbering 8,000, and Wilcox's numbering 9,000 effective men. Getty's division numbered 7,000. Gen. Lee in his report of the battle, says of the fight on the Plank road: "The enemy concentrated upon Gen. Hill, who with Heth's and Wilcox's divisions successfully resisted the repeated and most desperate assaults." Gen. Lee was not given to the use of strong adjectives.

tives in his reports, and when he calls the fighting "most desperate," we may be sure it was so. There was, however, no great "concentration" upon Hill's corps. The force which attacked him was simply Getty's three brigades. The importance of this service is thus estimated by Swinton: "This junction of roads was a strategic point of the first importance, and if Hill should be able to seize it he would interpose effectually between the two Union columns [the 5th and 2d corps of our army]. Discovering this danger, Gen. Meade early in the day directed a division of the Sixth corps under Gen. Getty, to hold stoutly the position until Hancock's junction could be effected. While the latter was still far off, Getty had begun to feel the pressure of the enemy, and hour by hour it grew more heavy on him. But he held his post immovably, till towards three o'clock in the afternoon, the welcome cheer of Hancock's approaching troops was heard."

But before Hancock arrived Getty had struck Hill with the vigor which Gen. Lee characterized as "most desperate." Getty moved against an enemy already moving to attack him. The struggle partook of the peculiar characteristics of the battle of the Wilderness,—unseen movements of troops, terrific volleys of musketry bursting at close range from the thickets; charges through woods so dense that a field officer could scarce see more than the line of a company; sudden appearances and disappearances of bodies of troops through the smoke and jungle; regiments on each side hugging the ground for shelter, not daring to rise for either advance or retreat, yet keeping up incessant fusillades; an almost Indian warfare in the forest. Hill had two men to Getty's one, but he secured no advantage, and when night compelled a cessation of the struggle our men still held the Brock Road. The desperate bravery and dogged resistance

of Getty's division saved the army of the Potomac from tremendous disaster ; and the tables of casualties show what share the Vermont brigade had in the work. A thousand Vermonters fell that afternoon, and lay either stark in death or till brought in by the searching parties which were seeking the wounded all night at peril of their lives, for the enemy fired at every light or noise. There was little rest and less sleep for our veterans that May night, and at daylight the fighting was renewed.

Longstreet had been marching all night to the support of Hill, and the Ninth corps to the aid of Warren and the Fifth corps ; and Grant and Lee had each decided to attack at daylight.

Lee's main effort was still to secure the approach by the Orange Plank road, to the Brock Road. At first the advantage was on our side. Hancock had placed two divisions of his own corps, the 2d, in front of Getty's division, and attacked at 5 o'clock with great vigor, while Wadsworth's division of the Fifth corps assaulted Hill's right. His lines gave way at once, and he was driven back a mile or more, till Lee's headquarters were in sight. At this juncture Longstreet arrived, in force sufficient not only to check Hancock's advance, but to attack in turn, and with superior numbers. Under his vehement attack the divisions in front of Getty gave way and were forced back over all the ground they had gained. Back rolled the tide of battle till it struck the line in which stood the Vermont brigade. It was the last line left to guard the junction of the roads, and there was no reserve. The situation was critical in the extreme, for there was still a wide gap on Hancock's left between the 2d and 5th corps, which Burnside with the 9th corps had been expected to fill, but he had not yet arrived. The fate of the day and of the

army again depended on the steadiness of Getty's veterans. Wheaton's brigade had suffered seriously the day before, and our Vermont brigade had lost a man out of every three in the ranks, and many of its best officers. Of the regimental commanders of the day before but one was left. Col. Stone of the 2d had been killed, and Lt.-Col. S. E. Pingree took his command. Col. Foster of the 4th had been seriously wounded, and Major Pratt succeeded him. Lt.-Col. Lewis of the 5th had lost an arm and Major Dudley took his place. Col. Barney of the 6th was shot through the head with a mortal wound, and Lt.-Col. Hale assumed command of the regiment. *Eleven* captains and *nine* lieutenants had been killed, and *thirty* commissioned officers of companies wounded. But the survivors faced the new emergency with as grim determination as ever. Behind a low breastwork of old logs, thrown up by the enemy the day before, they awaited Longstreet's attack. He expected no more serious opposition than he had thus far met that day. "We thought," he said in conversation subsequently with Mr. Swinton, "that we had a second Bull Run on you." He never was more mistaken. Again and again his lines advanced to the attack and as often went back in disorder. Longstreet fell (by a volley from his own side,) and Gen. Lee assumed direction of the assault in person. But it was all of no use. His repulse was always complete in front of the Vermont brigade. On their right Wadsworth's division was driven back, leaving the body of their brave commander in the hands of the enemy. On their left line after line gave way. Facing now to the front and now to the flank, they held their position for three hours, till the enemy had pushed quite around their left flank to their rear, when amid almost universal disorder all around them, they moved back to

their old stand in front of the Brock road, and from this, though once more attacked, they were not dislodged. It had fallen to them twice to hold the key of the region, and they held it to the end. The two other brigades of Getty's division were permitted that night to return to the Sixth corps; but Gen. Hancock declared that he could not spare the Vermont brigade, and it stayed and held its position on the plank road through the third day, and until Lee withdrew his army and Grant resumed his forward march. The value of the service rendered by Getty's division on those two terrible days can hardly be exaggerated, and the list of killed and wounded shows on what part of his command fell the heaviest burden of the fighting. The killed and wounded of the first Vermont brigade numbered 1,232, very equally divided among the five regiments. It was one of *thirty-one* infantry brigades actively engaged in the battle of the Wilderness. Its casualties were *one-eleventh* of the entire casualties of Grant's army, in the battle. There were no captures of any considerable number from its ranks. The number reported missing were but a small fraction, and a portion of them, it is known, belonged in the list of killed and wounded. It was a frightful proportion of loss by deaths and wounds,—the loss of every other man in the brigade. But those lives were dearly sold. Our boys went into the first day's fight with fifty rounds of ammunition in their boxes and pockets, and expended them all the first day. They were supplied afresh for the second. They were cool and fired low. As they fought some of the time behind breastworks, the front of which they piled with Confederate dead, it would be fair to presume that they inflicted heavier loss than they suffered. But though Gen. Lee never made any report of his losses in that battle, this is not

left altogether to surmise. The field return of the army of Northern Virginia for the 20th of April, 1864—two weeks before the battle—is on file at Washington. On that date Gen. Hill reported, for his corps, 20,644 enlisted men, present for duty. On the 8th of May, the day after the battle of the Wilderness, Gen. Jubal Early took command of Hill's corps, and Early says, in his memoir, that it then numbered 13,000 muskets. If this was so, the Confederate corps which received the chief attention of Getty's division, lost over 7,000 men in that battle—or a full third of its number; and as Gen. Longstreet has admitted that the repulse of his corps was also largely the work of Getty's division, a heavy addition of Confederate casualties must stand credited to that noble division. Of that division the Vermont brigade has been rightly called the back bone, and Gen. Getty was wont ever after to speak of the Vermont troops as steadiest of the steady, and brave as the bravest, and as having no superiors as fighters, among any troops of any country.

Our First brigade was not the only Vermont organization that rendered good service in the Wilderness. The 10th Vermont regiment was in the 3d division of the Sixth corps. The 17th Vermont and the 3d Vermont Battery were attached to the Ninth corps. The First Vermont Cavalry were there under Sheridan, and three Vermont companies of sharpshooters were with the Second corps. All of these, but the battery, were actively engaged; but my limits will permit no fuller mention of their share of the battle.

The oft told story of Cedar Creek need not be here retold. It was one man's victory, more than any other of the war; but even Sheridan might not have been able to pluck victory from the jaws of defeat, without some rallying point—some solid

nub of resistance, round which his army could be reassembled. He found such a nub when he found Getty's division holding a firm front to the enemy while all other portions of the army were in full retreat. He tells us this himself. His report of the battle says that the only infantry he found opposing the enemy when he reached the front, was Getty's division, and that it was on Getty's line he reformed his army for the grand advance. Getty's report says his division had held that position "unsupported for over an hour after all other troops had left the field." When Sheridan rode up to the line of the old brigade he first found things "all right," and they remained right till the First Vermont Cavalry closed the day, in the dusk of the evening, by the greatest capture of rebel artillery ever made by a single regiment in a field battle. It may not be possible to substantiate this proud claim by statistical proof, for no catalogue of such captures, so far as I am aware, exists : but no Vermonter has ever heard it successfully disputed. The captures made by the Fifth New York Cavalry, who accompanied the First Vermont in that charge, which scooped in three miles of Confederate guns and wagons, stood next to those of the Vermont troopers ; but were short of those made by our boys, both in the numbers of Rebel guns captured and of Union guns recaptured.

Of course all understand that the *twenty-three* confederate field pieces taken by the First Vermont Cavalry were not stormed in battery. Our cavalry but gathered in the fruits of the general rout of Early's army ; but the First Vermont Cavalry was one of the two regiments selected for this crowning piece of work. It had done its share of the day's fighting. It was part of the cavalry force which assisted Gen. Wright and the Sixth Corps in holding Early back, and was fighting when

Sheridan reached the front. It led the last charge through masses of Confederate infantry. It took and kept and brought in the guns with their caissons and wagons and a lively sprinkling of rebel brigadiers and colonels; and it turned them over and took a receipt for them, which is the most eloquent piece of paper held by any regiment that took part in the war.

We come now to the closing struggle in front of Petersburg. Sheridan, at Five Forks, on the first of April, '65, (when the First Vermont Cavalry was again engaged and captured many prisoners,) had cut off and driven westward the right of Lee's army. The final grand assault on the fortifications of Petersburg was ordered for the next morning. It was to be made by Gen. Wright with the Sixth Corps, in the centre, the Ninth Corps under Gen. Parke, and Gen. Ord's Corps from the army of the James. Gen. Wright had told Gen. Grant that he was confident he could go through the lines in front of him, and had promised to "make the fur fly" when he got the order. He had some reasons for his confidence. Several days previous to the assault Gen. L. A. Grant had discovered on the left and front of his position an opening in the Confederate line of works. This was at the bottom of a ravine, the sides of which had been covered with a thick growth of timber. The enemy had been cutting these woods near their front for firewood, and had thus disclosed the fact that their breastwork and abattis did not connect at the bottom of the ravine. The gap was one or two rods wide, and to the right of it was another small opening, made for the teams which had come out for wood. Gen. Grant called Gen. Getty's attention to this. Getty notified Gen. Wright, and Wright consulted Meade, and the four generals went down together to examine the spot, and selected it as the point of attack for an "entering wedge." During the

night of the 1st of April, the Sixth Corps was formed in echelon, opposite this point, for the assault. At daybreak a signal gun was fired, by the Third Vermont Battery, from Fort Fisher, and the wedge went in. It was led by the Old Vermont Brigade, closed in mass by battalion. The Fifth Vermont was the point of the wedge, and Capt. Gould of that regiment, was the first man inside the hostile breastworks, and received a bayonet wound in the mouth as he sprang over them. The Vermont Brigade took the batteries on each side of the ravine, brushed the enemy right and left, and made a broad opening for the troops that followed. The Sixth Corps, says Swinton, swept "the line of works to its left like a whirlwind, and in less than an hour its advance had struck and torn up the South-side Railroad, the long coveted line of Confederate supply." The Vermont Brigade, as we have seen, supplied a good part of the momentum of this whirlwind, and though the honor of the first entrance through the fortifications has been claimed by troops that passed, hours after, through the opening made by the Sixth Corps, I believe that it belongs to and will stay with our Vermont Brigade. Our regiments followed up their advantage with splendid energy. They stormed redans, took batteries and turned them on the enemy; wherever they fought they led instead of followed; and at nightfall the left of the brigade was at the Appomattox River, and its headquarters were at the Turnbull House, which had been Lee's headquarters all winter, and it is said were occupied by him the night before.

Other Vermont regiments gained distinction on that day. The Tenth Vermont was with the Third division of the Sixth Corps, and its colors were the first planted by that division in the enemy's works. The Seventeenth Vermont attacked with the Ninth corps, and had a share in the capture of Fort Ma-

hone. The Third battery silenced the guns of Battery Owen before it was taken by the Twenty-fourth Corps. But it cannot be doubted that of all the blows under which the defences of Richmond crumbled, the decisive one was that given by the Sixth Corps. It was called, indeed, by Gen. Meade in his report, "the decisive movement of the campaign." Next morning all that was left of Lee's army was in full retreat, and close to the head of the blue column which bore the stars and stripes through the blazing streets of Richmond to the Confederate Capitol, was a Vermont regiment—our Ninth, of Weitzel's command. Our Vermont regiments joined in the pursuit of Lee, fought him at Sailors' Creek, helped bring him to bay at Appomattox, and the First Vermont Cavalry was actually in motion for a charge upon his rear, when word came of his surrender. Four days after, on the 13th of April, the Seventh Vermont was engaged with Confederate cavalry at Whistler, near Mobile, in a skirmish which is called by Gen. Richard Taylor, the Confederate historian, the last engagement of the war. So the Vermont troops fought from first to last.

If I were attempting an epitome of the services of our Vermont soldiers, of course I could not omit mention of the splendid charge on Marye's Heights, still the admiration of all who beheld it, or the holding of the skirmish line, two miles long, at Funkstown, against repeated attacks of a rebel line of battle, or the fearful fighting of our men in the bloody "Angle" at Spottsylvania, or many other lustrous achievements of the Vermont boys in blue. But I have been merely running over the prominent battles named and noting the specially prominent pieces of service of the Vermonters in them. It must certainly be considered remarkable that in so many of them the troops of one of the smallest States—a State whose entire

quota was but one-eightieth of the aggregate of the Union armies—should have taken a distinguished part; that in so many crises of the war the result should have rested on their valor, steadfastness and skill; and that in none of these did they fail.

The cost of one of these battles to our State, in life and blood, has been mentioned. The aggregate of such sacrifice is equally worthy of note. A report of the Provost Marshal General made after the close of the war, gives a table of the deaths in action, or from wounds received in action, of the troops of the various States. Entire accuracy is not claimed for this table; but the causes of error were common to the States, and there is no reason to doubt that the percentages afford an approximately accurate basis of comparison. The significance of such a table as indicating the fighting character of the troops will not be questioned by any soldier. The greatest losses will, as a general rule, be found among the troops which are oftenest put in places of danger, the troops that fight when others fly, and that do not know when they are beaten. In this table the States of Kansas and Vermont largely exceed all others in the proportion of soldiers killed and mortally wounded. This ratio in the Kansas troops exceeds the average of the troops of the Union by 25.91 in each thousand. The ratio of Vermont exceeds the average by 23.12 in each thousand. Massachusetts and New Hampshire come next; but each lost ten men less than Vermont in every thousand. All other States had still lower proportions. Vermonters are content to share the honor of giving life and blood most freely to the Union, with Kansas, a State whose regiments were full of sons of Vermont.

It is not surprising that a part so truly brilliant as that of our Green Mountain State should sometimes have been exaggerated.

We may not assert, though it has often been asserted, that no Vermont flag ever fell into the hands of the enemy. The State flag of the Ninth Vermont, supposed to have been destroyed at Harper's Ferry, but found at Richmond among the captured Union colors and now preserved in this State House, disproves the statement. But it was not yielded to hostile hands in battle, and for its surrender, with the other colors of the garrison of Harper's Ferry, no Vermont soldier was in the least responsible. We cannot claim, as has been claimed, that Vermont had fewer deserters than any other State. At least the tables of the Provost Marshal General do not support that claim, though they do show that Vermont was less disgraced by desertions than any other New England State, and that she had a much smaller ratio of deserters than the general ratio of the army. It may not be well to claim, as has been claimed, that Vermont paid her soldiers better than any other State. As to regular State pay, doubtless this is true; but other States paid largely in aid to families of soldiers and enormously in bounties; and which paid most is not yet determined.

But we can claim, without fear of successful contradiction, that the people of Vermont were more nearly unanimous in the support of the War for the Union than the people of any other State. We can claim that in proportion to her taxable wealth, Vermont paid more for the support of the government than the wealthiest State and more than most of the States. We can say that in proportion to population Vermont had more sons in the army of the Union and fewer in the Rebel army than any other State. We can say that our State was one of three, Massachusetts and New York being the others, whose troops fought from Big Bethel to Appomattox. We can claim that in proportion to numbers, Vermont gave more lives to the Union

than any other State, save one. We can say that no Vermont regiment ever lost a flag in action. We can say that the soldiers of Vermont had at least as much to do in the accomplishment of the grand result, as any equal number. We can say that their service was as intelligent as it was effective. We can say that our citizens made less out of the government than others; and that no man can point to any colossal fortune in this State acquired by army contracts. If these things can be said, without desire to lower by a hair's breadth the credit due to any other community or to take a single laurel from the chaplets of our brothers in the Union Army, why should they not be said, and set down for the instruction of posterity?

My friends, brute courage is not a very admirable quality. Military glory, surely, is not the highest glory. If the war record of our State illustrates no higher quality, and shines with no brighter lustre than these, let us say nothing about it. It is because this service was *patriotic* service, that it is worth commemorating. True patriotism is a noble virtue, for at its root is the ennobling principle of *self sacrifice*, honored and praiseworthy on Earth and in Heaven. That we may commend this principle to those who follow us: that our children, in time of need, may exhibit in lofty exercise, as did our forefathers, the virtue which Webster defines as "the *passion* which aims to serve one's country,"—the passion which in the words of the Latin poet makes it "sweet and honorable to die for country,"—for this we do well to meet and to fight over the battles and chronicle the sufferings of the soldiers of the Union.

The Service of the Vermont Troops.

AN ORATION

BEFORE THE

RE-UNION SOCIETY

OF

VERMONT OFFICERS,

IN THE

REPRESENTATIVES' HALL, MONTPELIER, VT.,

NOVEMBER 2, 1882.

BY LIEUT. GEO. GRENVILLE BENEDICT.

MONTPELIER:

WATCHMAN AND JOURNAL PRESS.

1882.







LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 013 703 594 7

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 013 703 594 7